

TGWU speaks about AIDS

AIDS is a disease that can affect any person. At present, the disease has no cure but we can stop ourselves becoming infected with the disease by changing the way we behave sexually, as well as changing social conditions that effect social relations. The NUM has outlined some of these aspects in the previous article. The value of education in preventing this disease is clear and unions are increasingly recognising the importance of addressing the problem of AIDS with their members. Critical Health interviewed Thulani Dlamini of the Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU) to find out why the union has taken up the issue of AIDS. Dlamini discusses how workers and certain employers have responded to the issue, as well as the union's activities in this area.

Critical Health: Why is the Transport and General Workers' Union taking up the issue of AIDS?

Thulani Dlamini: Basically we have a problem, especially when it comes to the trucking industry because of the long distances which people travel and the length of time for which they are away. This means that on the way people tend to get involved in sexual situations with "prostitutes".

We haven't had any evidence to prove that there are any sufferers within the trucking industry but when we look at the whole situation of how AIDS is transmitted one can see that these are some of the first people who may be affected. This awareness gave rise to our concern because our membership consists mostly of truckers.

CH: Have transport employers taken any initiative around the issue?

TD: You'll hear of rumours that workers are to be screened or of threats that if they are found to be HIV positive (carrying the virus in their blood) they will be dismissed. At one company we heard that actual tests were being carried out and we had to stop the process before it went too far. We had to say to the company that the best way of doing this is for us both to educate the workers so that they themselves can prevent the AIDS situation from worsening rather than simply to get rid of those people carrying the virus.

As far as the results of the tests are concerned, the employers may now have these in

their possession, but following our intervention they can't use them to the disadvantage of workers. We are not aware of the results of the tests on the 10 or so who were screened.

CH: *Do you know if they were actually intending to fire people?*

TD: That was their sole intention. Their argument was that these people are going to be infecting other workers and that they are concerned as a company. We are saying to them that the nature of the industry itself is such that it exposes the workers to the whole situation. We have to educate them as to the specific ways in which the disease is transmitted so that they can guard against it as well as to know what to do in the event that they or someone that they know is identified as being HIV positive. What we have to do now is to get the programme going.

CH: *Have any companies indicated a specific policy which they intend to follow with regard to employees who are HIV or AIDS positive?*

TD: The general approach which we always discount is that if they do find people who are HIV or AIDS positive they will have to fire them. We always point out to them that just being close to an AIDS carrier does not make one vulnerable to contracting AIDS.

CH: *Do you foresee the trade union co-operating with employers in some kind of joint programme?*

TD: I think that is essentially necessary because the programmes need financial support and we hope that the companies will provide this.

CH: *Have TGWU workers participated in any programmes at this stage?*

TD: At the company which I mentioned earlier we agreed on two programmes. The one was for us to get together shop stewards on a national basis and for the Industrial Health Unit and the Workplace Information Group (health and safety service organisations) to brief them. Unfortunately this didn't take place because of the bad relationship between the company and workers that existed at that time.





TGWU workers on the march: the union is also committed to educating its membership about AIDS.

The second part of the programme was for the company to take its people, including a number of shop stewards (I think there were six) drawn from the branches across the country, and for them to undergo a course, conducted by certain doctors, for them to be trained to educate others about AIDS.

These people were mainly from line management - transport controllers and people like these - together with the shop stewards. The course cost over R1000 per person and so it was an extremely costly programme. We said to the company that they should fund the programme and we would provide the shop stewards because without their being involved, workers are not going to be receptive to anybody trying to explain this thing to them.

This programme was successful despite being co-ordinated by management because we went to union members and obtained their support.

From what we have gathered from the people who attended it was a very good course. We hope that they will be able to put the course to good use but this also depends on management providing transport for them to visit depots in their respective areas because they were strictly drawn on the basis of regions rather than branches per se.

CH: *Doesn't this come into conflict with their role as shop stewards?*

TD: One thing that one is a bit wary about is that when they go to these different depots they will be with the company's training officers. In most cases the workers are hostile to the training officers. The workers see them as people who are involved in favouritism and corruption and as people who are working directly for management. So that's why we believe there might be some kind of conflict because when the workers see the shop stewards going around with these guys there's very little that they'll listen to.

We want to propose that we should rather make use of the shop stewards who attended the programme at each branch. We feel that if the training officers are excluded the workers will be more interested in finding out what's going on.

We hope to get these people who attended the programme to get involved in educating other shop stewards at the national councils as well as the workers at other



Demonstrating how to use a condom - many people, however, are shy to talk about sex and this can make AIDS education difficult.

companies. If this is to happen then we will have to get the other companies to fund these programmes because they are quite expensive.

CH: *What other AIDS work has T&G been involved in?*

TD: We have been hoping for the past five or six months to employ a person to deal with health and safety issues and particularly with AIDS. It is expected that this person will be employed quite soon. The person will be responsible for formulating an overall approach to deal with the question of AIDS.

CH: *Once some one has been identified as being an HIV carrier, is there anything that the union can actually do to help such a person?*

TD: I think we can, even if it is in terms of moral support because the first problem that a person who is known to have AIDS faces is that they are isolated by the people around them. It's a question of teaching the people around this person to give as much support rather than isolating them.

Perhaps we can also assist them in raising funds towards the costs of whatever medical treatment is available.

CH: *One of the important things one has to persuade people about is that preventing AIDS involves one's own personal conduct and especially responsibility in how one conducts one's sex life. Could you tell us what kind of experiences you have had in raising with people this issue which relates to a personal and private side of their lives?*

TD: In some situations where we've tried to take this issue up with people we'll argue that people must limit themselves to one partner. In some cases people will argue that they can't be limited to one person.

The second alternative is obviously to encourage people to use condoms. You find that when people are discussing this they'll say that "Ja, perhaps this is the better alternative" but what you actually find when you check is that in fact condoms are not used.

One of the reasons why the shop stewards walked out in one of our meetings was because they felt it's their personal business which we are trying to discuss as opposed to union business. They felt we were attacking them. They said the union was talking about something which was none of the union's business. They were saying that getting involved with "prostitutes" is the only option which they have given their long absences from their families so you can see that there are vastly different perceptions of the actual seriousness of the disease.

It's a matter of taking the time to educate people thoroughly because at present some of them are not even prepared to co-operate.



Shopping for condoms - condoms can help prevent the spread of AIDS.

CH: Is this because these people don't like to talk openly about sex or is it just that they feel quite strongly that this is not the union's business?

TD: Some are simply shy to discuss it in an open forum but even on a person to person basis when you confront people directly there are some who say that this is just a personal issue which needs to be confronted by the individual.

CH: Have union members actually supported the union in taking up the issue?

TD: I would say that there is an overwhelming number of people who would say that this is an issue which does need to be tackled by the union. People are actually keen on getting involved in some kind of programme around the issue.

CH: You said you've been working with service organisations such as the Industrial Health Unit (IHU) and the Workplace Information Group (WIG). Have you been working with other unions at all?

TD: There have been some joint forums by the service organisations where the unions have come together but there hasn't been a forum where we have discussed common strategies.

CH: What's going to be the basic requirements of a programme which really confronts the problem of AIDS?

TD: The basic thing that we need to do is to come together as unions and as service organisations to draw up some kind of comprehensive programme around the question of AIDS. Without affiliates taking up the issue there's going to be a problem because none of them will be able to contribute to that comprehensive programme. So at this stage the unions need to get a health and safety worker and give him or her the main responsibility of taking up the issue of AIDS. Whatever comprehensive programme is drawn up would need to be taken back to members which in itself would create further awareness in terms of them having then to debate a particular proposal around the question of AIDS.

The lead has to be taken by the trade union movement because the people we have in the trade union movement are some of the people who are threatened most directly by AIDS and at the same time the kind of material which has been made available by the government, for instance the kind of posters which you see on notice boards in town, are of no use to them because many of them are illiterate.

Essentially I think the unions need to move and move quickly in terms of creating awareness around AIDS. □